DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 310 044 SO 020 149

TITLE	Chartered Pluralism; Reforging a Public Philosophy for Public Education. A Background Paper on the School Curriculum Project: Living with Our Deepest Differences.
INSTITUTION	Williamsburg Charter Foundation, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	Jun 88
NOTE	14p.; For related documents, see SO 020 147-148.
PUB TYPE	Viewpoints (120) -- Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Cultural Pluralism; Educational Philosophy; *Educational Planning; Educational Principles; Elementary Secondary Education; *Interfaith Relations; Religious Differences; Social Differences
IDENTIFIERS	*Pluralism; Religious Freedom; *Williamsburg Charter

ABSTRACT

How people live with each other's deepest differences is one of the world's most pressing dilemmas. In this pluralistic age the all too common response has been bigotry, fanaticism, terrorism, and state repression. In the United States, the religious liberty clauses of the First Amendment, the public school movement, and the presence of a public philosophy (a common vision for the common good), have tempered the forces of faction and self-interest and helped transform U.S. diversity into a source of national richness and strength. However, increased pluralism has resulted in controversy surrounding the relationships among the First Amendment, the public schools, and the public philosophy. Public schools are the storm center because they are the principal national institution entrusted with passing on the identity and mission of the United States from generation to generation. The Williamsburg Charter, which was drafted by representatives of America's leading faiths and presented to the nation on June 25, 1988, could serve as a public philosophy for public education since it embodies a vision of chartered pluralism that switches the accent from unity at the expense of diversity to unity in the interests of diversity. The source of unity is expressly not religious or irreligious; it is the common rights and responsibilities of citizens of all faiths or none. The nation needs to reach the stage where genuine disagreement becomes an achievement and genuine debate a democratic virtue. A eight-item bibliography is included. (JB)

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CHARTERED PLURALISM

Reforging A Public Philosophy For Public Education

A background paper
on some of the broader cultural questions
which underlie the School Curriculum Project:

Living With Our Deepest Differences

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CHARTERED PLURALISM

Reforging A Public Philosophy For Public Education

How do we live with each other's deepest differences? That simple question has been transformed by modernity into one of the world's most pressing dilemmas. On a small planet in a pluralistic age the all too common response has been bigotry, fanaticism, terrorism and state repression.

In many countries where there is still strong religious commitment, it has led directly to weak political civility. In many other countries, strong political civility has partly been the result of weak religious commitment. The daily experience of millions is that religious convictions and political freedom threaten, rather than complement, each other.

The American experience has been quite different. The world's "first new nation" was almost self-consciously an answer to this question from the beginning, and over the course of two centuries the difference has been made by a key trio of factors: the Religious Liberty clauses of the First Amendment, the Public School movement, and the presence within American society of a "public philosophy," or common vision for the common good.

Together, this trio of influences has tempered the forces of faction and self-interest and has helped transform American diversity into a source of national richness and strength. In doing so, it has grown indispensable to the singular blend of liberty and justice which is the birthright of Americans and the hallmark of American culture, and in particular that of American education.

Yet celebration should never be allowed to lapse into complacency, because the relationship of the trio is never static. Even the Constitution, the earliest and most fixed of the three, is not a self-interpreting, self-executing document, so the process of adjustment and readjustment to its constraints and standards is an ongoing requirement of American democracy.

Today, as the end of the twentieth century overlaps with the beginning of America's third century of Constitutional government, another period of readjustment is underway. New developments have caused great strains in old understandings of the relationship between the First Amendment, the public schools and the public philosophy.

A Challenge to Adjustment

Expanding pluralism is no stranger to the American experience. It has always been a major theme in our story, with tolerance generally expanding behind pluralism. But the last generation has witnessed yet another thrust forward in religious pluralism in two significant ways.

First, American pluralism now goes beyond the predominance of Protestant-Catholic-Jewish and includes sizeable numbers of almost all the world's great religions (Buddhist and Muslim, in particular). Second, it now goes beyond religion altogether to include a growing number of Americans with no religious preference at all (In 1962, as in 1952, secularists -- or "religious nones" -- were 2% of Americans. Today they are between 10 and 12%).[1]

The shock waves caused by this latest explosion can be observed at two different levels in American society. Both have a direct impact on public education and the dilemma of living with our deepest -- that is, our religiously intense -- differences.

In the first place, the effect of exploding diversity can be seen in the **demographic make-up** of contemporary American society. The state of California, for example, has America's most diverse as well as its largest

population. It now accepts almost one-third of the world's immigration and represents at the close of the century what New York did at the start -- the point of entry for millions of new Americans.[2]

California's elementary schools already have a "minority majority" in the first three grades. By 1990, this "minority majority" status will be reflected in all public school enrollments and soon after the year 2000 in the population as a whole. (The same situation already exists in all of the nation's 25 largest city school systems, and half of the states have public school populations which are more than 25% minorities.[3]) The result is a remarkable mix of the diverse cultures of Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America. It will also be as challenging a project in culture-blending as New York was in nation-building nine decades ago and Boston was at the birth of the Public School movement a century and half ago.

The effect of the exploding diversity can also be seen in what is a form of **cultural breakdown** -- the collapse of the previously accepted understandings of the relationship of religion and public life. As a result, a series of bitter, fruitless contentions over religion and politics has erupted, extremes have surfaced, the resort to law has become almost reflexive, and any sense of common vision for the common good has been drowned in the din of charge and countercharge.

The consequences of increased pluralism are not unique to America. The disruptive effects can be seen elsewhere in the world, even in totalitarian societies (such as the challenge of the republics to the Soviet Union) and in democratic nations with long traditions of racial and linguistic homogeneity (such as the challenge of new immigrants in Britain).

Nor are the consequences simple. On the one hand, increased pluralism deepens old tensions. Under the challenge of "all those others," many are seemingly pressured to believe more weakly in their own faith, to the point of **compromise** -- the more choice and change, the less commitment and continuity. In reaction, however, others tend to believe more strongly, to the point of **contempt** for the faith of others.

On the other hand, increased pluralism helps develop new trends. Today's dominant tensions are not so much between distinct religions and denominations. As often as not, they are **between** the more conservative and the more progressive **within** the same denomination (for example, the recent divisions within the Southern Baptist Church), or between an alliance of the more conservative in several religions who oppose the more progressive in those same groups (for example, the Pro-life coalition of conservative Protestants, Catholics, Mormons and so on).

But not surprisingly, these changes have hit our trio of institutions directly, upsetting the balance of their previous relationship. The upshot is that the public schools have generally become the **storm center** of the controversies, one or other of the twin clauses of the First Amendment have been looked to as the sole **arbiter** in the partisan conflicts, and (whichever prevails) the common vision for the common good becomes the **loser**.

It is significant that the public schools are the storm center, because they are the principal national institution entrusted with passing on the identity and mission of America from generation to generation. They have therefore borne the brunt of both types of exploding diversity, though the impact of the second has been more immediate and more eye-catching -- in the conflicts over school prayer, creation science, "textbook tailoring" and so on.

Thus the public schools are now simultaneously the storm center of the problem and the test ground for any contending solutions. Living with our greatly expanding deepest differences while ignoring the public schools is an impossible task. Solutions to the challenge of exploding diversity which appeal to any of the trio (the First Amendment, the public schools and the public philosophy) while ignoring any of the others, are likely to prove not only weak but dangerous.

For example, regardless of any other merits of their proposals, both those who attack and those who defend the public schools without considering the health of the public philosophy in our time should

remember the effect of pluralism on education in other nations with an experience of "common schooling" similar to the American -- such as the current state of "pillarization" in Dutch education (which provides lessons for those who attack the public schools) and the current state of polarization in French education (which provides lessons for their defenders).

Needless to say, the problems raised by expanding pluralism are not the only challenge facing public education. As is often pointed out, the public schools are the crossroads of many of the deepest and most important tensions within American society. The most basic and obvious tension, that between parents and the state, can itself be spun out in a myriad of related forms -- families and schools, individuals and bureaucracy, individual rights and civic responsibilities, state government and federal government, professional educators and lay people, academic excellence and democratic opportunity, educational objectivity and cultural "neutrality," theoretical consistency and political compromises, consumer interests and monopoly pretensions, strict separationism and accommodationism in Constitutional theory, the framers' original intentions and history's results and so on.

Little wonder that the needed solution is not likely to be simple, partisan or sectarian. What is in question is a full range of deep and complex philosophical, ethical, political and cultural issues. What are at stake are the highest interests of individual liberty, community integrity and democratic vitality in the American experiment.

Charter for the Third Century

At first sight, the search for a just and commonly acceptable solution to these challenges seems as futile as squaring the circle. The question of religion and education in an increasingly pluralistic society appears to be a minefield of controversies, with the resulting ignorance, confusion and reluctance an understandable outcome. Yet if it is correct to trace the problem to the forces of pluralism rather than to ideologies, individuals or groups, then we have more victims than villains over this issue, and the wisest approach is to search together for a solution, not for a scapegoat.

In fact, the present moment offers a strategic opportunity. Extreme positions and unwelcome consequences are readily identifiable on many sides, and a new desire for consensus is evident. Further encouragement comes from factors as different as the educational opportunity afforded by the bicentennial celebration of the Constitution and theoretical insights provided by recent developments in philosophy, sociology and education. Among signs of constructive responses to this new moment are the American Federation of Teachers' *Education for Democracy,* the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's report, *Religion in the Curriculum,* and the joint initiative, *Religion in the Public Schools Curriculum: Questions and Answers,* by leading education and religious groups.[4]

One such fresh initiative is the recently published Williamsburg Charter, which can well serve as a public philosophy for public education. The Charter was drafted by representatives of American leading faiths, and revised over the course of two years in close consultation with political leaders, scholars and leaders of many faith communities. It was presented to the nation on June 25, 1988, on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of Virginia's call for the Bill of Rights.

The purpose of the Charter is four-fold: to celebrate the uniqueness of the First Amendment; to reaffirm religious liberty -- or freedom of conscience -- for citizens of all faiths and none; to set out the place of religious liberty within American public life; and to define the guiding principles by which people can contend robustly but civilly in the public arena.

The Charter is a rich and nuanced document, but its two principal themes center on the importance of religious liberty as America's "first liberty," and on the Religious Liberty clauses as the "golden rule" for civic life. The first theme (the **inalienable right**) is the one whose implications many liberals, particularly more secular liberals, have tended to ignore; while the second (the **universal duty** to respect that right for others) is one about which many conservatives, particularly more religious

conservatives, have been less than consistent. The Charter develops these themes in numerous ways, ranging from exposition of first principles to contemporary guidelines, but the overall effect is a powerful and even-handed restatement of a critical aspect of America's public philosophy, or common vision for the common good.

The notion of a public philosophy that underlies the Williamsburg Charter is widely misconstrued today. Objectors on one side (again, mostly conservatives) suspect it is too weak and therefore leads to irreligion and relativism, while objectors on the other side (again, mostly liberals) suspect it is too strong and therefore leads to civil religion and majoritarianism. Yet the intellectual antecedents of the notion are strong -- they stretch back through Walter Lippmann, Alexis de Tocqueville and James Madison to Edmund Burke and Jean Jacques Rousseau -- and the implications of the notion are squarely American.

From the outset, the United States has been a nation by intention and by ideas. One of our greatest achievements and special needs has been to create, out of the mosaic of our differences, a common vision for the common good. Mostly unwritten, often half-conscious, this common vision has been the binding tie that maintains unity to balance the richness and pressures of diversity, and transmits a living heritage to balance the dynamism of progress. For Americans to become, in Walter Lippmann's words, "a people who inhabit the land with their bodies without possessing it with their souls" would be a sure step toward disaster.[5]

The Williamsburg Charter stands, therefore, in a strong tradition, only making explicit what has long been implicit. It builds on the premise that, in the American tradition, consensus is a matter of compact as well as compromise; that when it comes to sustaining democratic freedom, "habits of the heart" are as critical as laws, and "civic" freedom (freedom for public life together) is as necessary as "liberal" freedom (freedom from outside interference by others). "Chartered pluralism" therefore stands between the extremes of irreligion and civil religion, relativism and majoritarianism. It avoids the problems of a liberal freedom without regard

for civic responsibilities, and of a civic freedom without regard for liberal rights.

To be more specific, the vision of chartered pluralism in the Williamsburg Charter forges a substantive agreement, or freely chosen compact, on three things: first, that religious liberty, or freedom of conscience, is a fundamental and inalienable right for people of all faiths and none; second, that religious liberty is a universal right joined to a universal duty to respect that right; and third, that the first principles of religious liberty require and shape certain practical guidelines by which civil discourse may be sustained in a free society that would remain free. Based on such a basic and principled agreement, the notion of "chartered pluralism" can be seen to give due weight to the first of its two terms. It is therefore properly a form of **chartered** pluralism, and avoids the weaknesses of interest-group liberalism, or any form of mere "proceduralism."

But at the same time the agreement is strictly limited both in substance and in scope. It does not pretend to include agreement over religious beliefs, political policies, constitutional interpretations or even the philosophical justifications of the three parts of the compact. "Chartered pluralism" is an agreement within disagreements over deep differences that make a difference. It therefore gives due weight to the second of its two terms, and it remains a form of chartered **pluralism** that avoids the dangers of majoritarianism, or any form of overreaching consensus that is blind or insensitive to small minorities and unpopular communities.

In the words of the introduction to the Charter:

> We readily acknowledge our continuing differences. Signing this Charter implies no pretense that we believe the same things or that our differences over policy proposals, legal interpretations and philosophical groundings do not ultimately matter. The truth is not even that what unites us is deeper than what divides us, for differences over belief are the deepest and least negotiated of all.

> The Charter sets forth a renewed national compact, in the sense of a solemn mutual agreement between parties, on how we view the place of religion in American life and how we should contend with each other's deepest differences in the public sphere. It is a call to a vision of public life that will allow conflict to lead to consensus, religious commitment to reinforce political civility. In this way, diversity is not a point of weakness but a source of strength.[6]

Unity-in-the-Interest-of-Diversity

Do recent controversies indicate that the United States is destined to suffer its own equivalent of Holland's earlier *schoolstrijd* and France's ongoing *lutte scolaire* and *guerre des manuels*? Is there no alternative to increasingly high-stakes litigation and the continued hemorrhaging withdrawal of hundreds of thousands of children from the public schools to private schools and home schooling?

At the core of the vision of chartered pluralism is the recognition that American pluralism is at a new stage that requires a new stress -- both in the American public philosophy and American public education. American religious diversity is now so strong that the source of common unity cannot itself be religious or irreligious. Respect for religious distinctiveness, rather than rejection of it, must be at the core of the common vision for the common good.

To switch the accent to unity-in-the-interest-of-diversity rather than unity-at-the-expense-of-diversity is to reaffirm the original vision of the Common School movement,but to question one aspect of the vehicle for attaining it. As leaders such as Horace Mann stated, the purpose of the Common School was to provide schooling for all the children in one community by moving beyond instruction in mere skills to education in character, ideals and loyalties; and thus to be a moral force for character-forming and nation-building. And above all, to become the place where the spiritual divisiveness, born of creeds, and the social divisiveness, born of classes, could both be reconciled. As the pioneers of public schooling foresaw rightly, far more was at stake than the value of free, universal

education, let alone such modern goals as individual fulfillment and national "competitiveness."

Yet to switch the accent now is to see that, over the course of 150 years, their chosen means to that end -- the stress on unity-at-the-expense-of-diversity and thus on dealing with distinctives by excluding them -- has become self-defeating. Rather than promoting unity, it has itself become a source of disunity. Thus, ironically, whatever is the purported belief content of the generalized focus of unity -- deism, generalized Protestantism, Protestant-Catholic-Jewish theism, civil religion, generalized secularism, New Age mysticism or whatever -- becomes as divisive as any form of sectarian diversity. Eventually the denial of diversity becomes as divisive as the original diversity. The omission of distinctives turns out to be as inflammatory as their inclusion. Seeking to be offensive to no one ends up by being offensive to everyone.

What the Supreme Court declared in 1943 in connection with public schools and the pledge of allegiance can now be seen to be far-sighted and to have wider implications for education as a whole:

> **As governmental pressure toward uniformity becomes greater, so strife becomes more bitter as to whose unity it shall be.** Probably no deeper division of our people could proceed from any provocation than from finding it necessary to choose what doctrine and whose program public educational officials shall compel youth to unite in embracing. The ultimate futility of such attempts to compel coherence is the lesson of every such effort.[7]

In contrast to the futile and dangerous quest for a false consensus over beliefs, chartered pluralism switches the accent from unity-at-the-expense-of-diversity to unity-in-the-interests-of-diversity. But the source of unity is expressly not religious or irreligious; it is the common rights and responsibilities of citizens of all faiths or none. Within this view, the distinctions of religious diversity are to be sharpened, not smothered. Debates over them and their public implications are to be strengthened, not stifled. Only so will there be a civic consensus broad and strong enough to integrate and motivate American society as a whole.

Whereas the process of over-generalization in regard to the "common faith" has led to our being "tongue-tied in civic disagreement" and "color-blind to tradition," we need to reach the stage where genuine disagreement becomes an achievement and genuine debate a democratic virtue. As a recent contributor to *Daedalus* expressed it,

> What holds us together as a people is not some comprehensive cultural agreement conceived as a value consensus. Rather, it is the coherence of our moral disagreement and argument within an ongoing cultural conversation that embraces multiple moral languages, practices and their social settings. Across every line of social difference we have enough in common to understand one another when we disagree and to argue about our life together.[8]

The Last Best Hope?

The new curriculum project, *Living With Our Deepest Differences,* should be understood within the framework of these broader cultural questions. It is a significant step in the larger endeavor of working out the practical implications of this new stage and new stress in America's public philosophy. To prove successful, it will require commitment, thought, perseverance and time. But if, instead, we insist on pursuing a religious *esperanto,* or illusory consensus of beliefs and values, there is a simple reason why the quest will be fruitless. Any parent or child can always find some fundamental difference in values between their family and the school's lowest common denominator. Down that road lies the folly of endless litigation and further flight from public education.

The first stage in the descent from poor religion to poor history and poor social studies may have passed slowly and barely noticed. The last one, lapsing into poor democracy, would happen fast and not go unopposed. Should one of the founding purposes of the public school prove its undoing, our generation will be guilty of something worse than irresponsibility -- that special folly which comes from lack of irony and historical perspective. The vision of chartered pluralism is no empty theoretical exercise. It is the key

to a reforged public philosophy which is perhaps the last, best hope of public schooling as we know it.

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[5]Walter Lippmann, "The Living Past," (*Today and Tomorrow*, April 13, 1943.

[6]*The Williamsburg Charter* (The Williamsburg Charter Foundation, Washington, D.C., 1988) p. 8.

[7]*West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* 319 U.S. 624 [1943], Emphasis added.

[8]Steve M. Tipton, "The Church as a School for Virtue," *Daedalus*, (Spring, 1988) pp. 170, 171.